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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: CONTROVERSIAL ORTHODOX CHURCH FIGURE TO  
BE RELEASED FROM PRISON

REF: 06 SKOPJE 316 AND PREVIOUS

¶1. (U) Zoran Vraniskovski, the defrocked Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC) bishop recognized by the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) as Archbishop Jovan of Ohrid, likely will be released from prison on May 1, after serving nine months of a one-year sentence for an embezzlement conviction (reftel). Vraniskovski began serving the sentence on August 8, 2006 after being convicted of embezzling 57,000 euros of funds donated to the MOC. On February 22, the Veles Trial Court decided in favor of Vraniskovski's appeal for an early release due to good behavior, which would allow him to be freed on parole as of May 1. Vraniskovski was out of prison for several days on leave for the Easter holiday; he was expected to return to prison on April 15 and to be released shortly thereafter. (NOTE: The Macedonian prison system allows prisoners in an "open" regime a certain number of leave days, which Vraniskovski has typically taken in order to celebrate religious holidays with his followers.)

¶2. (U) On April 10, the Veles Trial Court also acquitted Vraniskovski, for the second time, on a separate embezzlement charge stemming from accusations that Vraniskovski embezzled 324,000 euros of MOC funds while he was still a MOC bishop. Vraniskovski was originally acquitted by the Veles Trial Court on April 3, 2006. However, on January 24, the Skopje Appellate Court accepted the prosecution's appeal and ordered the Veles court to retry the case. This acquittal, however, may not be the end of Vraniskovski's legal wrangles, as the prosecution is expected to appeal the acquittal once again.

¶3. (SBU) COMMENT: Vraniskovski's expected early release from prison will put an end to nearly two years of on-again, off-again imprisonment on convictions his supporters argued were politically and religiously motivated. If the latest acquittal on the second embezzlement charge stands, it may end further legal proceedings against him. Vraniskovski's release could serve to reduce tensions between the MOC and SOC, and also is a positive step forward in the government's efforts to end this intra-Orthodox dispute and demonstrate its commitment to full religious freedom in Macedonia in order to meet NATO and EU membership standards.  
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